

FOUND AT BLAZING STAR.

PART I.

The rain had only ceased with the gray streaks of morning at Blazing Star, and the settlement awoke to a dismal sense of gloominess and the blinding of forgotten knives, tin cans, and smaller camp utensils where the heavy showers had washed away the debris and dust heaps before the camp doors. Indeed, it was resounded in Blazing Star that a fortunato early riser had once picked up on the highway a solid chunk of gold quartz which the rain had freed from its encumbering soil and washed into immediate and glittering popularity. Possibly this may have been the reason why early risers in that locality during the rainy season adopted a thoughtful habit of hasty and suddenly lifting their eyes to the critted or Indian-like washes skies above them.

"Cass" Board had risen early that morning, but not with a "gold." A leak in his cabin had been quite consistent with his carelessness, but he had consulted him at La. M., with a flooded "bank" and wet blankets. The rains from his wood pile refused to kindle a fire to dry his bed clothes, and he had recourse to a more provident neighbor to supply the deficiency. This was nearly opposite Mr. Cassius' crossed the highway and stopped suddenly. Possibly alighted in the nearest road post before him. Gold surely! But, wonder to relate, not an irregular, shapeless fragment of crude ore, fresh from Nature's crucible, but a bit of jeweller's hamper in the form of a plain gold ring. Looking at it more attentively, he saw that it bore the inscription, "May to Cass."

Like most of his fellow gold seekers, Cass was superstitious, "Cass!" His own name! He tried the ring. It fitted his little finger closely. It was evidently a woman's ring. He looked up and down the highway. No one was yet stirring. Little pools of water in the red road were beginning to glimmer and grow easy from the far-dashing east, but there was no trace of the owner of the shining waif. He knew that there was no woman in camp, and among his few comrades in the settlement he remembered to have seen none wearing ornaments like this. Against the superstitiousness of the inscription, to his rather pensive mind, it would have been a personal source of playful comment in a camp that made no allowance for sentimental memories. He slipped the glittering little loop into his pocket, and thoughtfully returned to his cabin.

Two hours later, when the long, straggling procession, which every morning wended its way to Blazing Star Gulch—the seat of mining operation in the settlements—began to move, Cass saw fit to interrogate his fellows. "Ye didn't none on ya happen to drop anything round ye last night?" he asked cautiously.

"I dropped a pocketbook containing Government bonds and some other securities, with between fifty and sixty thousand dollars," responded Peter Drummond carelessly; "but no matter, if any man will return a few autograph letters from foreign potentates that happened to be in it—of no value to anybody—but the owner can keep the money. That's nothin' mean about me," he concluded laconically.

This statement, bearing every evidence of the grossest mendacity, was lightly passed over, and the men walked on with the deepest gravity.

"How ye you?" Cass presently asked of another.

"I lost my life to Jack Hamlin at draw-poker over at Wingand last night," returned the other pensively. "I don't calculate to find it lying round loose."

Forced at last by this kind of from-to more detailed explanation, Cass had turned to him his discovery, and produced his treasure. The result was a dozen vague surmises—only one of which seemed to be popular, and to suit the despicably despondency of the party—a despondency born of hastily mastened fried pork and flapjacks. The ring was believed to have been dropped by some passing "road agent" laden with guilty spoil.

"It was you," said Drummond gloomily. "I wouldn't flourish that pertinaciously around much folks. I've seen better men nor you strung up in tree by Vigilantes for having even less than that in their possession."

"And I wouldn't say much about being' up—d—d it this morning," added an even more pessimistic comrade. "It might look bad before a jury."

With this the men sadly dispersed, leaving the innocent Cass with the ring in his hand, and a general impression on his mind that he was already an object of suspicion to his comrades. An impression it is hardly necessary to say, that any man who had intended to display his wealth had better leave it in his gunnysack bosom.

Notwithstanding Cass's first hopeful supposition, the rider did not seem to bring him to the camp any luck. Daily the "clean-up" brought the same scant rewards to his comrades, he took the habit of wearing the ring only at night. Wrapped in his blanket he stealthily slipped the golden circle over his little finger, and, as he averred, "slept all the better for it." Whether it ever evoked any human dream or vision during those calm, cold, virgin-like spring nights, when even the moon and the greater planets retreated into the icy blue, steel-like firmament, I cannot say. Enough that this superstition began to be colored a little by fancy, and his fatalism somewhat mitigated by hope. Dreams of this kind did not tend to promote his efficiency in the communistic labors of the camp, and brought him a self-isolation that, however gratifying at first, soon debited him the benefits of that hardy, wild, wrist which underlined the grinning of his fellow workmen.

"I'm dog-darned," said one commentator. "If I don't believe that Cass is losing over that yarning he found. Wears it on a string under his shirt."

Meantime, the seasons did not wait the discovery of the secret. The red pools in Blazing Star highway were soon dried up in the fervent June sun and riotous night winds of those attitudes. The ephemerous grasses that had quickly supplanted these pools and the chocolate-colored mud, were as quickly parched and withered. The footprints of spring became vague and indefinite, and were finally lost in the impalpable dust of the summer highway.

In one of his long, aimless excursions, Cass had penetrated a thick undergrowth of buck-eye and hazel, and found himself quite unexpectedly upon the high road to Bed Chief's Crossing. Cass knew by the lurid cloud of dust that hid the distance that the up-coach had passed. He had already reached that stage of superstition when the most trivial occurrence seemed to point in some way to an elucidation of the mystery of his treasure. His eyes had mechanically fallen to the ground again as if he half expected to find in some other waif a hint or corroboration of his imaginings. Thus abstracted, the figure of a young girl on horseback in the road directly before the bender he emerged from, appeared to have sprung directly from the ground.

"Oh, come here, please do quickie!"

Cass started, and then moved hesitatingly toward her.

"I found some one coming through the bushes, and I went on," continued Cass, "and something took hold of me."

Instantly he realized that the something although turned and looking like no mere insect, or winged insect, was which had looked into his eyes with a certain kind of pleased contempt.

It was a girl, the woman's countenance, "so pretty," that I must admit fresh and full, as well as for my nose, in fact, beating him about a brash face for scale," partaken, back and hair as thin as thread."

His apparent glee from this hour, "The reason that not Cass's eyes was a man's," half-blinking, lying empty and vacantly in the

grass. It was new, shiny, and of modish shape. But it was so incongruous, so perkily smart, and yet so bold and helpless lying there, so gaudily half-bright in its very appropriateness and incongruity to adjust itself to the surrounding landscape that it affected him with something more than a sense of its grotesqueness, and he could only stare at it blankly.

"But you're not looking the right way," the girl went on shrilly, "look there!"

Cass followed the direction of her whip. At last, what might have seemed a coat thrown carelessly over a chair, and which, indeed, he became aware of a white rigid garment, neatly plucked apart, protruding from the flaccid sleeves mingled with it in some absurd way and half hidden by the grass, lay what might have been a pair of soft-trimmed trousers but for two rigid boots that pointed in opposite angles to the sky. It was a dead man. So pitifully dead that life seemed to have taken flight from his very clothes. So impotent, feeble, and degrades by them that the naked subject of a dissecting table would have been less insulting to humanity. The head had fallen back, and was partly hidden in a moribund burrow, but the white, unmarked face and closed eyes had less of helplessness in them than those wretched wrappings. Indeed, one limb had lay across the swollen abdomen lent itself to the grotesquely hideous suggestion of a gentleman sleeping off the excesses of a hearty dinner.

"Am the horrid?" continued the girl; "but what killed him?"

Struggling between a certain fascination of the girl's cold-blooded curiosity and horror of the murdered man, Cass hesitatingly lifted the helpless head. A blushing halo above the right shoulder and a few faint pink-like spots on the forehead, shrouded and matted hair proved the only proof.

"Turn him over again," said the girl impatiently. Cass obeyed, and, according to his best knowledge, he had been a man of about four years. We had a clench and a stamp around, and when we was separated, it was only a question of shootin' on sight. He left Lagrange at sunup the next morning, I daresay, to have been a day or two earlier. The head had fallen back, and was partly hidden in a moribund burrow, but the white, unmarked face and closed eyes had less of helplessness in them than those wretched wrappings. Indeed, one limb had lay across the swollen abdomen lent itself to the grotesquely hideous suggestion of a gentleman sleeping off the excesses of a hearty dinner.

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